



Transportation Advisory Committee

Zoom meeting: <https://zoom.us/j/98019430447?pwd=dnViVjNnTElVeGo1bm5JcFczU2NEdz09>

Meeting ID: 980 1943 0447

Passcode: 194156

Minutes

Thursday, October 1, 2020

Chuck Wilhoit called meeting to order at 2:03 p.m.

Meeting was held via Zoom

Members Present: Carla Augustad, Hugh Austin, Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Jenny Cloutier, Jessica Kramer, Marceen Liechti, Marcy Roberts, Robert Smith, Tegen Vine, Kevin Warrington, Kyle Waterman

Staff Present: Lisa Sheppard (Agency on Aging Director), Thomas Schneider (Eagle Transit Transportation Manager), Kristina Stone (Eagle Transit), Elizabeth Wood (Dispatcher)

Guests: N/A

Call to Order: TAC Chair Chuck Wilhoit opened the meeting.

Public Comments: There was no public comment.

Chair Opening Remarks: Chuck thanked everyone for their willingness to participate in the meeting virtually again during Covid-19.

Approval of Minutes: Minutes of the June 6, 2020, meeting were reviewed. Hugh Austin moved to approve the minutes. Second by Kyle Waterman. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Officer Elections

- ❖ Chuck Wilhoit noted Kyle Waterman's interest in serving as TAC Chair and invited a motion. Hugh Austin moved to approve Kyle Waterman for Chair. Second by Jenny Covill. Motion passed unanimously.
 - Kyle thanked Chuck for his 10 years as TAC Chair. Kyle mentioned that he has been on the committee for 3 years and thanked the committee members for the opportunity to serve as Chair. Kyle stated that he is also very excited about the Mountain Climber rebranding and looks forward to this new venture.
 - Given that no one has volunteered at this time to serve as Vice-Chair, Kyle proposed we wait to vote on a Vice-Chair until the next meeting. He also mentioned we have vacant positions on the committee and reminded everyone to be looking for others who might be interested in serving.

Future Meeting Schedule

- ❖ Lisa proposed we meet every other month, with the yearly cycle beginning in February to allow us to stay on track with requirements related to our annual planning and application for transit funding. Our annual meeting will be held in October, and August will be an optional meeting (to be used as a make-up or for special topics). The meetings will continue to occur on the first Thursday of the month from 2:00-3:30 pm. **Motion** made by Jenny C. to hold meetings every other month as described above. Chuck seconded. Motion passed unanimously.
- ❖ Lisa noted we will meet this December (to replace the meeting that normally would have occurred in January) to allow the TAC to give input on the annual Transportation Coordination Plan, which members will then vote on in February.

COVID

- ❖ Lisa gave an update on the CARES Act funding. CARES Act funding has covered 100% of our expenses since January 20, 2020. We just learned at the end of September that Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) will continue to reimburse us for the full cost of our expenses using CARES Act funds through the end of December, at which time MDT will again re-evaluate. Not having to spend matching funds has allowed us to build up some financial cushion, including setting aside funds for future capital purchases.
- ❖ In addition to being able to use CARES Act funds to cover all regular operating costs, we have also been able to secure COVID-specific items, including PPE, Plexiglass to create a barrier between the passengers and the drivers, and enhanced cleaning and sanitizing. We also received permission from MDT to use funds to catch up on vehicle and facility maintenance back log, make office improvements that enable us to keep staff separated and purchase laptops to support remote work.
- ❖ MDT has also set aside money for capital improvement projects. We are looking into purchasing the bus shelters from Chandler Communication which would allow us to sell advertising on the shelters as a source of future revenue. FTA requires an independent business valuation prior to using federal funds for this type of purchase. MDT will pay for 80 of the cost of the valuation with planning funds. We are in the process of securing bids to complete the valuation.
 - **Question-** Chuck asked how many shelters are in the valley. **Answer-** There are 21-22 shelters in the valley.
 - **Question-** Kyle asked if it would include the bus shelters in Evergreen and other shelters that we do not use and can we move the shelters. **Answer-** Tom stated that the purchase would include all shelters in our area. If we are bringing in additional resources, then we have an incentive, and needed funding, to use them. Under those conditions, we believe we can use each of the existing shelters in some way, even if it is just for a seasonal commuter. We could move them if necessary, but that can be costly and may be logistically difficult due to the need for electricity and accessibility of the surrounding area.
 - **Question-** Marcy asked who would maintain the shelters and pay for the cost involved. **Answer-** Tom said we would more than likely contract out for weekly service but will weigh that cost against having our staff perform the work. The business valuation will take maintenance and repair costs into consideration.
- ❖ Ridership overall has been down over 40% during the past several months due to COVID, and hiring drivers has been very difficult.
- ❖ We had a positive COVID case on one of the buses. We contacted all riders that were exposed and advised them to reach out to either the KRH Hotline or their personal care provider.
 - We had to make quick changes to our services due to resulting driver shortages, including suspending our fixed route service in Kalispell, the Tri-City Commuter and service in Columbia Falls.

- Within a day of making these changes, we transitioned to General Public On Demand service in Kalispell as a scalable, flexible alternative to fixed route service. On Demand service is an appointment-based, shared ride, origin to destination service like paratransit, but anyone can use it and there are fewer compliance requirements. We had already been researching this type of system as a more permanent option and so were able to put what we had learned into play.
- On Demand service is inherently dispatch intensive and the phones have been extremely busy.
- **Question-** Kyle asked if we aren't using the fixed route buses for fixed routes, is there anything else we can be using them for? **Answer-** Tom said we can look at it going forward but that for now we are using all of our available drivers to staff the On Demand service, which is running from 6:30 a.m.- 6:30 p.m. to address the needs of workers for early morning and evening service.

Transportation Manger Report – Tom Schneider

- ❖ MDT recently completed a Compliance Review on Eagle Transit (they conduct one every 3 years). Our team worked very hard on preparing for the review and we're pleased to report there were no findings.
- ❖ Tom presented the Mountain Climber rebranding design choice (snow/ski scene on one side, summer/hiking scene on the other), resulting from our 5-Year Transportation Development Plan process and significant stakeholder feedback.
 - Tom noted we wanted a design that would grab the general public's attention and represent the spirit of our valley.
 - We are working on getting sponsorships for the back of the bus or a small area in the rear corner, but we wanted to keep the primary on the Mountain Climber brand so passengers and the public can clearly identify our vehicles.
 - The lifespan of the wraps is up to 10 years.
 - We opted to leave the windows unwrapped. Over the years, riders have expressed they prefer a clearer view out of the windows than can be achieved with wraps.
 - **Comment-** Chuck mentioned that he is very pleased we're not wrapping the windows. He asked how close are we to launching and do we plan on marketing once we are rebranded. Tom stated we are waiting for a 3rd bid for the wraps. We would like to get most of them completed by the end of December to take advantage of the CARES Act funds. We plan to develop a marketing plan around the rebranding. Lisa noted we are hoping to launch a new website to coincide with the wrap roll-out.
 - **Question-** Chuck asked if the wheel caps are going to be black or white. **Answer-** The caps would look better black so we will look into that.
 - **Comment-** Lisa mentioned that the sponsorships on the back of the buses would be easily removable.
 - **Comment-** Kyle mentioned that it is very important that we utilize the TAC members to help generate excitement and keep the good momentum going.
- ❖ Tom gave an update on the possibility of converting the fleet to propane. We have spent a lot of time researching the option, but at this time it doesn't seem to be the best fit for us as we are still refining the direction we want to go as agency, there are considerable costs associated with the project and it's unclear where the funding would come from for the tank or the conversion of existing buses.
 - Conversion kits for the buses run around 20-25K per bus.
 - As far as we are aware there are no other transit agencies in the state using propane.
- ❖ Tom discussed the General Public On Demand service.
 - He noted our research shows nationally that a number of systems are transitioning from fixed route service to on demand services to create more flexibility for passengers, especially workers.

- We took a planning trip over the summer to Idaho where we visited 5 different transit operations, including some near Boise where they just went live with their On Demand services. They are using technology from a company called Via to manage the service, which allows passengers to schedule trips with a smart phone app. They are hoping to increase their rides to 5-10 rides per hour compared to their previous average of 2-3 rides per hour.
- We have been visiting with both Via and Uber (which recently purchased RouteMatch) to determine which technology would best meet our needs. Both would allow for the creation of virtual stops or hubs, driven by localized demand, to serve as pick-up/drop-off spots for the general public in addition to door-to-door options for those who need it. Both rely on user-friendly smart phone apps with algorithms designed to maximize efficiency, but also offer dispatcher-controlled options to manage rides for those passengers who don't have smart phones.
- **Question-** Due to Covid, North Valley Hospital has been needing to look at different transportation options. With one of these apps would we be able to set up a business account where NVH could be billed for rides. **Answer-** Tom answered that yes, both apps have options for prepaid rides and other billing options, as well as differential fare structures.
- **Question-** Kyle asked if using the Uber app will make our drivers Uber drivers. **Answer-** Tom answered that it would not make them Uber drivers.
- **Question-** Kyle asked if this would free us from the Dial-A-Ride model. **Answer-** Tom said that this would free us from paratransit rules specifically. Current paratransit riders would use (and are currently using) the On Demand system. Lisa explained some differences and similarities between on demand service and paratransit. For example, there is an application process for paratransit but not for On Demand as it is open to everyone in the service area.
- ❖ We are still exploring ideas for seasonal commuters, including Kalispell to West Glacier during the summer. A number of local businesses have shown interest in helping to fund commuter service.

Meeting adjourned at 3:35 p.m.